

Message Text

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17

ACTION EA-09

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 OMB-01

IO-11 /068 W

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P R 270942Z JAN 76

FM AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2336

INFO AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

AMEMBASSY JAKARTA

AMEMBASSY MANILA

AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE

AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON

CINCPAC

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CINCPAC ALSO FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PGOV MY

SUBJ: TRANSITION: SOLIDARITY BEHIND NEW PM, CABINET CHANGES

YET TO MATERIALIZE

REF: KUALA LUMPUR 0281 (DTG 150520Z JAN 76,

KUALA LUMPUR 0311 (DTG 190800Z JAN 76

1. SUMMARY: BOTH HOUSES MALAYSIAN PARLIAMENT
EULOGIZE LATE PM AND EXPRESS CONFIDENCE IN
DATUK HUSSEIN ONN AS SUCCESSOR. CABINET, WITHOUT
CHANGES, SWORN IN JANUARY 24. KEY POSITION OF DEPUTY
PM STILL UNFILLED, ALTHOUGH BEHIND SCENES MANEUVERING
BY CONTENDERS IN PROGRESS. AGRICULTURE MINISTER
GHAFAR BABA AND EDUCATION MINISTER MAHATHIR APPEAR
MOST VIABLE CANDIDATES. END SUMMARY.

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2. AS OF LATE AFTERNOON JAN 27 DEWAN RAKYAT (HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES) STILL MEETING IN SPECIAL SESSION TO EULOGIZE LATE PRIME MINISTER AZAK. MP'S ARE LIKELY ALSO TO PASS CONFIDENCE MOTION IN FAVOR OF NEW PRIME MINISTER DATUK HUSSEIN BIN DATUK ONN, AS DID DEWAN NEGARA (SENATE) WHEN IT SUSPENDED REGULAR BUSINESS JAN 21 TO PASS A VOTE OF CONFIDENCE IN HUSSEIN ONN. SINCE BECOMING PM JAN 15, HUSSEIN ONN HAS RECEIVED MESSAGES OF SUPPORT FROM NUMEROUS POLITICAL FACTIONS, INCLUDING OPPOSITION FIGURES, AS WELL AS FROM WIDE VARIETY OF NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS.

3. CABINET HUSSEIN ONN INHERITED FROM HIS PREDECESSOR WAS SWORN IN AGAIN (A "MERE FORMALITY" AS A SPOKESMAN FROM THE PRIME MINISTER'S DEPARTMENT PUT IT) ON JAN 24. SEVENTEEN OF THE EIGHTEEN CABINET MINISTERS PLUS ALL SIXTEEN DEPUTY MINISTERS WERE PRESENT TO REAFFIRM THEIR OATHS OF "LOYALTY AND SECRECY" BEFORE THE KING. NO NEW FACES WERE PRESENT, ALTHOUGH PRIOR TO RAZAK'S DEATH ONE SUBCABINET OFFICIAL HAD BEEN TRANSFERRED FROM ONE MINISTRY TO ANOTHER (MOKHTAR HASHIM, FROM POST OF DEPUTY MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE TO THAT OF DEPUTY MINISTER OF DEFENSE).

4. KEY POSITION OF DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER REMAINS VACANT, AND HUSSEIN ONN HAS RETAINED RESPONSIBILITIES HE HAD HELD AS DEPUTY PM. ALTHOUGH HE HAS INDICATED THAT HE DOES NOT WANT TO BE RUSHED INTO FILLING THE VACANCY, PRESSURES ARE LIKELY TO MOUNT FOR HIM TO DO SO, ESPECIALLY IN VIEW OF HIS ANNOUNCED PLANS TO VISIT JAKARTA, BANGKOK AND SINGAPORE PRIOR TO ATTENDING THE ASEAN SUMMIT SCHEDULED TO BE HELD IN BALI IN LATE FEBRUARY, WHICH WILL REQUIRE SOMEONE BEING APPOINTED ACTING PRIME MINISTER IN HIS ABSENCE. FRONT RUNNERS FOR POSITION CONTINUE TO BE GHAFAR BABA (MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, SENIOR LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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UMNO VICE PRESIDENT AND SECRETARY GENERAL OF RULING NATIONAL FRONT COALITION) AND DR. MAHATHIR MOHAMAD (MINISTER OF EDUCATION, AND ONE OF THE THREE ELECTED UMNO VICE PRESIDENTS) OTHER NAMES MENTIONED INCLUDE DATUK MUSA HITAM (MINISTER OF PRIMARY INDUSTRIES); TENGKU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH (CHAIRMAN OF PETRONAS, THE NATIONAL PETROLEUM CORPORATION); AND LOCAL UMNO STRONGMAN, DATUK

HARUN IDRIS (CHIEF MINISTER OF SELANGOR STATE, HEAD OF UMNO YOUTH, AND BY VIRTUE OF LATTER POSITION, A VICE PRESIDENT OF UMNO). IN GHAFAR BABA'S FAVOR ARE HIS REPUTATION AS AN UMNO PARTY LOYALIST, HIS REPORTED ACCEPTABILITY BY OTHER CONSTITUENT PARTIES OF THE NATIONAL FRONT COALITION AND THE FACT THAT HE IS A "SEASONED" POLITICIAN (IN FACT WHEN HUSSEIN ONN SUFFERED A HEART ATTACK IN MARCH, 1975, GHAFAR BABA SERVED FOR A TIME AS ACTING PRIME MINISTER). WE HAVE HEARD, HOWEVER, THAT GHAFAR BABA IS UNACCEPTABLE TO UMNO YOUTH (I.E., TO HARUN AND HIS ALLIES). MAHATHIR IS BRIGHT AND COMPETENT, AND THERE ARE INDICATIONS THAT HIS TOUGH ATTITUDE TOWARD STUDENT UNREST RECENTLY AT A LOCAL JUNIOR COLLEGE FOR MALAYS MAY HAVE ATTENUATED SOMEWHAT HIS REPUTATION AS A MALAY CHAUVINIST. MUSA HITAM AND TENGKU RAZALEIGH BOTH POSSESS ADEQUATE REPUTATIONS AS MALAY NATIONALISTS WHILE REPORTEDLY RETAINING RESPECT OF OTHER NATIONAL FRONT PARTIES, BUT BOTH SUFFER FROM BEING CONSIDERED INSUFFICIENTLY EXPERIENCED (ALTHOUGH MUSA, 42, HAS CONSIDERABLY MORE EXPERIENCE IN RESPONSIBLE POSITIONS THAN DOES RAZALEIGH, 37). DATUK HARUN, DESPITE SETBACKS STEMMING FROM ON-GOING COURT ACTION INVOLVING CHARGES BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CORRUPTION AND ABUSE OF OFFICE, RETAINS SUFFICIENT POLITICAL CLOUT AND TROUBLE MAKING POTENTIAL NOT TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY.

5. COMMENT: SO FAR THE TRANSITION FROM RAZAK TO HUSSEIN ONN HAS BEEN ORDERLY AND SMOOTH, WITH PRESS PLAY REINFORCING THE BASIC THEME THAT A CAPABLE AND EXPERIENCED STATESMAN HAS INHERITED THE LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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MANTLE OF LEGITIMACY FROM A DISTINGUISHED PREDECESSOR WHOSE FUNDAMENTAL POLICIES WILL BE CONTINUED. BENEATH THE SURFACE CALM FRENETIC JOCKEYING FOR POSITION IS UNDER WAY AS VARIOUS CONTENDERS VIE FOR COVETED NUMBER TWO POSITION WHILE OTHERS SEEK TO OBTAIN OR RETAIN POSITIONS WHEN CABINET CHANGES DO MATERIALIZE. RAZAK'S DEATH ALSO LEFT A NUMBER OF SPECIAL ASSISTANTS, STAFF AIDES AND ERSTWHILE PROTOGES SUDDENLY IN THE COLD, WHOSE MOURNFUL COUNTENANCES REFLECT BOTH SORROW AT THEIR MENTOR'S PASSING AND ANXIETY FOR THEIR OWN PERSONAL FUTURES.

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